

DIRECTIONS

Big, Dead, Rotting, Silly Rabbit

On an Italian hill top, tricks are for art students.

For some, the Piedmont region of Italy calls to mind ancient Barolo vineyards and the Shroud of Turin. For others, it evokes an enormous stuffed pink rabbit, splayed atop a mountain as if dropped by a cloud-borne Brobdignagian child. The Viennese art collective Gelatin falls in the latter category.

Gelatin — also known as Ali Janka, Florian Reither, Tobias Urban and Wolfgang Gantner, 30-something friends who met at summer camp in 1978 — have created a 200-foot-long, 20-foot-tall bunny knitted from wool and stuffed with hay. Since late September, it has lain prostrate at the summit of the Colletto Fava, a nearly mile-high peak above the rustic village of Artesina. It looks cute, all soft and cotton-candy-hued — until one notices that it's meant to be quite dead. The rabbit's (stuffed, colorful) entrails stream out on the scrubby ground; its mouth is open in a wide and surprised "O."

"It's rotting away and the intestines are running out of its side, but it's really sweet," Mr. Janka said. "It has a warmth and a gravity. It's nice to lie on it." It's especially nice if you're interested in the way things rot: grass has sprouted through the rabbit's knitted skin, it's beginning to ooze a brown liquid, and animals have foraged inside. Decay, it seems, is the whole point. "You climb upon the rabbit and feel like a maggot in its flesh," Mr. Janka said. "And then you are so happily transforming into a fly, and floating away."

Gelatin's recent work has been just as pockmarked, if a little more raw: a massive icicle made of urine for this year's Moscow Bien-

nale of Contemporary Art; a nude "human birthday cake" — with candles held in a way that defies description in a family newspaper — for the 2003 Frieze Art Fair in London. And in the summer of 2000 they secretly removed a window on the 91st floor of the World Trade Center, then inched out onto a homemade balcony where they were photographed. On Nov. 16, the group is to take up residence at the Leo Koenig Gallery in Chelsea — and live there, in a box, for seven straight days, making free facsimiles of any object or document visitors give them.

The bunny, which Gelatin winkingly insists will remain in place until 2025 (by which point it will have decomposed completely) has been in the works for some time. "We made casts of other stuffed animals — bears, Smurfs, penguins," Mr. Janka said. "But the rabbit was best because of the way it falls on the ground. The ears give you a nice flat access to walk up on it." The artists say, somewhat dubiously, that they recruited "hundreds of grannies" to knit squares of the pink woolen casing, which the Gelatin team sewed together on site. It took months to find the right location, one where the locals were amenable and the terrain was appropriately dramatic.

"Also, we wanted a place where the food is good, so when you work there you don't go crazy," Mr. Janka added.

And now the possibilities are limitless. "We can make anything out of straw," Mr. Janka said. "Even high-rises, I think."

MEREDITH KAHN

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